GALLERY 4

The Early Renaissance in Florence

In fifteenth-century Florence, where most of the works in this room were painted, many people believed themselves to be living in a new age. The term "Renaissance," already coined by the sixteenth century, describes the "rebirth" from the dark ages of decline that followed the brilliance of ancient civilization. In Italy, especially, the Renaissance was spurred by a revival of Greek and Roman learning. Works by classical authors, lost to the West for centuries, were rediscovered, and with them a new, humanistic outlook that placed man and human achievement at the center of all things.

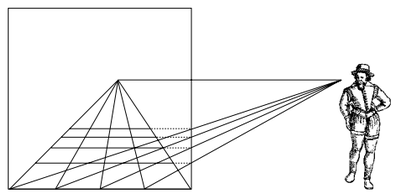
Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Masaccio

Humanists in Florence styled their city a "new Athens." It was a fiercely mercantile state, struggling to remain independent and committed to republican virtues though controlled in practice by the powerful Medici family. No single factor can explain the unrivaled artistic flowering it experienced in the early 1400s, but the contributions of Brunelleschi in architecture, Donatello in sculpture, and Masaccio in painting changed Western art forever. Brunelleschi measured ancient buildings in Rome to understand the harmony of classical proportions and reintroduced such elements of classical architecture as the columned arcade. He applied engineering genius to design the huge dome for the cathedral of Florence and invented the system of one-point perspective (see below). Donatello, who accompanied Brunelleschi to Rome, carved some of the first large-scale, freestanding statues since antiquity. Like those ancient figures, his were sometimes nude. In Florence's Brancacci chapel Masaccio painted a series of innovative frescoes that used light, coming strongly and consistently from a single direction, to model figures with shadow and give them robust three-dimensionality. He put into practice Brunelleschi's theories about how to project depth onto a flat surface, employing the lines of painted architecture to create a convincing illusion of space.

Perspective

Artists and audiences have always perceived pictorial space in ways that suit their worldview—their way, literally, of "looking at the world." In religious painting of the late Middle Ages, for example, space seems to open out from the picture plane. It encompasses the viewer to make him part of the sacred events depicted, bringing him into the same sphere with the holy figures of Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

During the early Renaissance, however, as humanism focused attention on man and human perception, the viewer assumes the active role. Now, instead of projecting outward, space recedes—with measured regularity—from the viewer's eye into the picture plane. Because the viewer himself is the point of reference, the illusion of space is more realistic than was ever before achieved. Brunelleschi is credited with the "invention" of one-point perspective, but it was given systematic form a generation later in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on painting, *De pictura*, published in 1435. In one-point, also called linear, perspective, all lines converge to a single point in the distance—the vanishing point. Often it is possible to see where the artist has scored these perspective lines into the surface of the painting to serve as guides.



Masolino da Panicale
Italian (Florentine), 1383–probably 1440/1447

The Annunciation, probably 1425/1430

Fifteenth-century viewers of this Annunciation would have recognized not only its general subject, but the particular moment Masolino chose to paint. Street preachers gave vivid accounts of Gabriel's message to Mary about Christ's birth, and audiences would also have seen the Annunciation reenacted on feastdays. In Florence, Brunelleschi designed an apparatus to lower an actor portraying Gabriel from the cathedral dome, as young children dressed as angels hung suspended in rigging. Viewers would recall the sequence of the drama. Mary was first startled at the angel's sudden appearance; she reflected on his message and queried Gabriel about her fitness; finally, kneeling, she submitted to God's will. Here Mary's downcast eyes and musing gesture—hand resting tentatively on her breast—suggest the second, and most often depicted, of these stages: reflection. Like actors in the religious plays, artists used gesture and posture to communicate a state of mind.

Masolino is best known for his collaboration with Masaccio on the frescoes of the Brancacci chapel in Florence—and for his failure to pursue Masaccio's innovations. Masolino continued to paint in a style that was delicate and ornamental. His colors are flowerlike; his figures elegant but unreal. They do not seem so much to exist within the painted space as to be placed before it. In the ceiling, colorful tiles, a device used by Masaccio to create perspective lines, are merely decorative and leave space ambiguous.

Tempera on panel, 1.480 x 1.149 m (58¼ x 45¼ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.16

Florentine, 15th century

Matteo Olivieri, 1440/1450

The two portraits in this room are among the first from the Renaissance. During the late Middle Ages, depictions of individual donors had often been included in religious paintings, but it was not until the early fifteenth century that independent portraits were commissioned. The earliest ones are, like these, simple—even austere—profile views. Very likely, they were influenced by portrait busts and the profile heads on ancient gems and coins, which were avidly collected by Renaissance humanists. The popularity of the independent portrait was spurred by a new focus on the individual and an appreciation of individual accomplishments—a new conception of fame.

Matteo Olivieri's portrait—his name appears on the ledge—was originally paired with one of his son Michele, who may have commissioned both works. Though painted long after Matteo had died (he left a will in 1365), the portrait depicts a young man, as did the portrait of his son, who must have been at least sixty-five when the works were painted. Most portraits were probably commissioned as commemorations of the deceased by families who wished to remember them in the prime of life. As Renaissance art theorist Alberti noted, a portrait "like friendship can make an absent man seem present and a dead one seem alive."

Tempera on panel transferred to canvas, .476 x .337 m (18⅞ x 13¼ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.15

Domenico Veneziano
Italian (Florentine), about 1410–1461

Saint John in the Desert, about 1445

This panel and *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (hanging nearby) are from one of Domenico's major works, a large altarpiece in the church of Santa Lucia dei Magnoli in Florence. They formed part of its *predella*, the lower tier of small scenes that typically illustrated events in the lives of the saints who appeared in the larger central altar panel above.

Domenico's John the Baptist is unusual. Earlier artists had shown him as an older, bearded man, with matted hair and clad in animal skins. Here, though, we see a youthful John at the very moment he is casting off the fine clothes of worldly life for a spiritual existence. His graceful figure, nude and modeled like an ancient statue, is one of the first embodiments of the Renaissance preoccupation with the art of ancient Greece and Rome. The figure is convincingly three-dimensional because the tones Domenico used for his flesh are graduated, one color blending continuously into the next. The landscape around the saint, however, belongs to an earlier tradition. Its sharp, stylized forms increase our appreciation for the desolation John is about to embrace in the stony wilderness; they dramatize his decision and give his action greater significance.

Tempera on panel, .284 x .324 m (11⅛ x 12¾ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.48

Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi

Italian (Florentine), about 1400–1455; about 1406–1469

The Adoration of the Magi, about 1445

An inventory of Lorenzo de' Medici's private chambers included a round Adoration—perhaps this one. It was the most valuable painting listed, although ancient cameos and natural wonders such as "unicorn horns" were worth several times more.

The artist named in the inventory was Fra Angelico, but this work is usually thought to be a collaboration between him and a fellow Florentine, Fra Filippo Lippi. Very likely the painting remained in one of their studios (whose is still debated) for a number of years, receiving sporadic attention from several workshop painters. The sweetly angelic Virgin and Child, the throng of worshipers in the upper right, and the rich carpet of plants in the foreground were probably painted by Fra Angelico. Most of the work, however, bears the stamp of Filippo. His figures are more robust and sharply defined. Compare, for example, the broad face of Joseph at the right to the Virgin's more delicate features.

All elements of the composition—figures, cityscape, landscape—spiral in response to the panel's round shape. This is one of the first examples of a tondo, or circular painting. In the 1400s, tondos became popular for domestic religious paintings. In the case of the Adoration, the shape may have been suggested by *deschi da parto*, painted platters used to bring fruit, sweets, and gifts to refresh new mothers after giving birth.

Tempera on panel, d. 1.372 m (54 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.2

Filippo Lippi

Italian (Florentine), about 1406–1469

Madonna and Child, 1440/1445

Orphaned at a young age, Filippo Lippi was raised in the Carmelite convent of Santa Maria in Florence, where he would undoubtedly have seen Masaccio and Masolino at work on the frescoes in the Brancacci chapel. He took vows himself, but proved to be wholly unsuited to religious life. His name surfaces often in court documents. Tried for embezzlement (even tortured on the rack), he lived openly with a Carmelite nun, Lucretia Buti, who was his model and with whom he had a son—painter Filippino Lippi. His patron Cosimo de' Medici sheltered Filippo in "protective custody" at the Medici palace hoping to prod him into finishing tardy commissions, but the artist used torn bedsheets to escape. He was eventually allowed to leave his order and marry Lucretia, but continued to wear a monk's habit and sign his works Fra ("brother") Filippo.

Filippo's Virgin is wistful and slightly melancholy, while the infant's heavy, almost muscular form recalls Masaccio's emphatically three-dimensional figures. Masaccio had used strongly directional light to reveal the form of his figures. Filippo's Virgin and Child, on the other hand, are bathed in an overall glow that prevents the modeling of the figures from overpowering the graceful and well-defined line of his composition. As Filippo grew older his reliance on line increased and Masaccio's influence lessened.

Tempera on panel, .797 x .511 m (31⅜ x 20⅛ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.290

Andrea del Castagno

Italian (Florentine), 1417/1419–1457

The Youthful David, about 1450

The unusual shape of this work is explained by its original use as a parade shield. Its painted scene is exceedingly rare—most parade shields were decorated with simple coats of arms. This is, in fact, the only shield painted by a recognized master that has survived to the present day. It may have been carried in civic or religious processions or have been made as a sign of authority for a citizen-governor.

Images of young David, who overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to kill the giant, were popular in fifteenth-century Florence, the smallest major power in Italy. The city saw itself threatened by such Goliaths as the pope, the duke of Milan, the king of Naples, and the doge of Venice. David's image is especially appropriate decoration for a shield since throughout the Psalms David's poetry echoes the notion of God as his shield: "His truth shall be thy shield and buckler" (Ps. 91.4).

Like many early Renaissance artists, Castagno has presented the action and its outcome simultaneously: David holds the loaded sling, but already the head of the slain Goliath lies at his feet. David's energetic pose, based perhaps on an ancient statue, creates a strong contour that would have been clear and "legible" as the shield was carried. Nevertheless, the youth's body is well modeled, rounded with light and shadow to give a convincing likeness of a body in action.

Tempera on leather over wood, 1.156 x .769 m (45½ x 30¼ in.). Widener Collection 1942.9.8

Benozzo Gozzoli

Italian (Florentine), 1420–1497

The Dance of Salome, 1461/1462

A contract for an altarpiece, executed between the artist and the Confraternity of the Purification of the Virgin, gives explicit instructions. The artist "is obligated to apply himself to this painting so that the said picture will excel, or at least favorably compare with, every good picture made thus far by [him]." The appearance of the central section is carefully prescribed: the Virgin is to be flanked by John the Baptist and five other named saints "with all the usual attributes." Gozzoli must also "with his own hand…paint at the bottom, that is in the *predella*…the stories of said saints."

This is one of those *predella* panels. And here Gozzoli had the freedom to exercise his particular skill as a storyteller. In this one small painting he has packed three episodes related in Matthew 14:6-8. At the center of the painting, we see the twirling figure of Salome, dancing to entertain Herod and his guests, all of whom wear fifteenth-century finery. Herod was so enchanted that he promised Salome whatever she might ask, and prompted by her mother, who sought revenge against John, Salome's request was bloody: "Give me the head of John the Baptist…." There inside an archway at left the saint kneels to be beheaded. And at the rear Salome presents the severed head to her mother.

Tempera on panel, .238 x .343 m (9⅜ x 13½ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.3

Master of the Barberini Panels

Italian (Florentine-Umbrian), active third quarter of the 15th century

The Annunciation, about 1450

Despite attempts to link the painter of this panel with well-known fifteenth-century artists, his identity remains uncertain. His style, which draws on older artists like Fra Filippo Lippi, also shows evidence of newer trends, especially in his treatment of distant space. Follow the lines of the architecture: the regular rhythm of arcades and arches recedes into the background. The grid formed by the courtyard measures the distance for our eye.

These converging perspective lines lead to a door beyond which we glimpse a lush garden. This is not a random choice of landscape. The artist has used perspective not simply to create a convincing depiction of space, but to lead us to see the theological implications of his scene. In reference to her virginity, Mary was often called the *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) and the *porta clausa* (closed door). Many Annunciations translate these themes with visual images of locked doors and walled gardens. Here instead, the perspective takes us through an *open* door into the heavenly garden of Paradise. The Annunciation, because it is the beginning of Christ's human existence, also heralds the redemption of humankind. The open door underscores the promise of salvation as well as Mary's role in the Incarnation and as intercessor for the prayers of men and women.

Tempera on panel, .876 x .629 m (34½ x 24¾ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.218

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.